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Who could benefit from a \$275 billion federal highway bill?

Clearly, Illinois, says local representatives.

"When you look at this bill, the average state receives 12 percent. Illinois received 28 percent," said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th.

The House passed the bill Friday, 357-65, and now it must be reconciled with a \$318 billion transportation bill from the Senate. Congressional leaders are negotiating a compromise that a majority in both the House and the Senate would support.

Among the 204 Illinois projects are creating a western entrance to O'Hare International Airport near Devon or Thorndale avenues, widening Quentin Road between Lake-Cook Road and Dundee Road in Palatine; and starting work on the Metra STAR line. (See related story.)

Federal gas tax receipts would pay for the projects.

Although President George W. Bush has threatened to veto the proposed legislation, Kirk said this revised version may be more to the president's liking.

Last year's version proposed general fund spending and a 12-cent-per-gallon gas tax.

"I think the president was very right to be concerned about that legislation," Kirk said. "We have now pulled it down from \$374 billion to \$275 billion. I think it reflects the right balance of taking care of the country's infrastructure and boosting employment."

"This bill was also seen as a jobs program," he added. "Transportation spending translates directly to more jobs."

Kirk said he expects final legislation will be passed in mid-October.

State fares well

In staking their claim, state leaders argued Illinois is a transportation crossroads that serves all regions of the United States.

In the past, Illinois received less money than it has collected in federal highway dollars, due to a formula that determines how the money is distributed.

"The federal highway funding formula has become a very complex and political document," Kirk said.

If funding were distributed strictly according to highway miles, then Alaska would receive the most money. If population were the determining factor, most of the money would go to California. One of the reasons Illinois fares so well this time is how the formula was revised.

Kirk said Illinois' boon in the House version is a "testament" to the cooperation of two Illinois congressmen on this proposed legislation - Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-14th, and Rep. William Lipinski, D-3rd.

"In the past, Illinois has had partisan warfare that undermined our overall effort," Kirk said. "This time the Republicans and Democrats worked together. Illinois did very, very well."

The House bill would bring more road projects to Illinois than the Senate version, so Kirk said

Illinois congressional leaders must remain united.

"What I expect they will do is the Senate will come down to the House number," Kirk said. "What we need to is make sure the House formulas, which advantage Illinois, are the final ones."

Elk Grove Mayor Craig Johnson hopes the transportation proposal, including the western access to O'Hare International Airport, will come to fruition.

"We have a lot of support for this project at the national level. As the project stands now, it takes in a huge portion of the state, and I think it could be very helpful for many, many communities," he said.

"I know, economically, it's a tough time and the president will be looking to trim the budget, but if the funding is not cut, this kind of mass transit project will only help the economy of the entire state," Johnson said.

IDOT control

The meat of the House bill lies in road projects.

Developing the list of projects began 2 1/2 years ago, Kirk said.

Most of the projects would involve federal money funding 50 percent of the projects, with state and local governments kicking in the remaining half. Transit projects typically involve 70 percent federal funding and 30 percent local contribution.

About 90 percent of the House bill's dollars would pass directly through the Illinois Department of Transportation or the city of Chicago.

In some cases, the money would fund projects that are now part of IDOT's five-year road construction plan, said Dick Smith, IDOT director of planning and programming.

Those projects would almost certainly begin earlier than now scheduled, he said. Even so, land-acquisition negotiations and developing engineering plans could still hold up some projects despite new federal funding.

Kirk's area

Kirk proposed widening and adding left-turn lanes to the state Route 60 bridge over Interstate 294, Kirk said, to deal with increased traffic congestion there

"After 3 p.m. you can basically get a hotel room," he said.

Mayor Arlene Mulder, Kirk said, can be credited with helping bringing two projects proposed for Arlington Heights to his attention in a timely manner. One would add turn lanes on Northwest Highway at Arthur Avenue and the Prindle Avenue underpass. The other would resurface Euclid Avenue between Walnut and Douglas avenues.

Another proposal would create a demonstration project to provide drivers on Lake-Cook Road with accurate travel times between U.S. routes 12 and 41.

As Congress hammers out a compromise, Kirk said he has put in a bid that would give governors a say in rules that require train engineers to sound horns at railroad crossings in populated areas. Although a proposal to give state governors the power to amend the train whistle bill did not receive support from the House Transportation Committee, Kirk said his proposal is not dead yet.

"I received assurances some sort of compromise on the train whistle rule will be put out (for discussion)," Kirk said.

Staff writer Patrick Corcoran contributed to this story.